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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses issues in the selection of an appropriate focus for a focus school. Schools with a theme and schools targeted for particular students, which are both components of the focus-school genre, have long been a part of the nation's education system. A number of school districts, especially in urban areas, have established focus schools to such an extent that 44 percent of the nation's multischool districts now have such schools. Equity issues and effectiveness concerns are issues of principle that must be considered. With regard to organization, the focus may be on the curriculum, the method of instruction, or the orientation or worldview embraced by the school. Any theme or focus must possess a logical coherence and transformative power. A school that fulfills its promise as a focus school is also a restructured school. Contains 15 references. (SLD)

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SELECTING THE FOCUS OF A FOCUS SCHOOL

Schools with a theme and schools targeted for particular students—both components of the focus school genre—have long been a part of the Nation's education system. In 1990, this concept of focus schools received a strong boost from a RAND Corporation study suggesting that special purpose schools would probably be preferable to comprehensive high schools for *most* students in New York City (Hill, Foster, & Gendler, 1990). The study calls such schools "high schools with character"—those that have a clear, coherent commitment to character, as well as academic, development; feature a core of shared learnings; emphasize the reciprocal responsibilities of the school's students and adults; and stress achievement.

Lately, a number of school districts, especially in urban areas, have been establishing focus schools, and a recent study suggests that 44 percent of the Nation's multischool districts now have such schools (Steel & Levine, 1994). The ability of the school's focus to both attract students and staff and provide a framework for an effective education program is key to the success of such schools. Therefore, this digest discusses the issues involved in selecting an appropriate focus.

Issues of Principle

Equity Issues

Given the national commitment to equity, a school's focus should not segregate students along racial, ethnic, religious, gender, or socioeconomic class lines. To wit, schools designed to attract the gifted and talented, which admit only the ablest or best performing students, have met with increasing criticism. There are various ways to prevent the exclusion of disadvantaged and/or low-performing students from focus or theme schools, however. Minnesota's school choice law prohibits admissions requirements based on past academic performance or behavior. In Montclair, New Jersey, programs labelled "gifted and talented" exist, but any family wishing to enroll its children in them may do so—on the assumption that all children have talents. Another approach is New York City's, where a quarter of the seats in semi-selective high schools are saved for students admitted by lottery, even though they fail to meet admission requirements.

Focus schools designed to serve a particular disadvantaged minority are sometimes, but not always, considered a different matter. An early alternative school for Hispanic youngsters, Casa de la Raza in Berkeley, posed problems related to both the Constitution and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Appleton, 1973). Schools targeted explicitly for African American males, and excluding all others, have also been challenged in the courts (Jones, 1991). More recently, however, the Legacy School for Integrated Studies, one of New York's 34 new small high schools, seems to have met with no resistance, because, while it targets African American children and the poor, it does not exclude others.

Schools for marginal students, or programs targeted for dropout prone youngsters, also raise concerns. One is whether grouping students according to their alleged deficiencies is a form of tracking, since tracking tends to segregate and compound the problems of already disadvantaged students (Oakes, 1985).

Effectiveness

A focus should enhance a school's academic effectiveness as well as promote equity. Thus, it should attract students and staff who share an interest in a specific instructional program. Focus school advocates suggest that student interests and orientations, and family priorities, may offer far more practical guidance for developing programs and grouping students than do ability levels.

There is no longer reason to believe that what average, or even poor, students need instructionally is very different from what the ablest need. For instance, Resnick (1987) emphasizes that *all* of learning should be cooperative, active, contextualized, and concretized—features important for teaching at-risk students (Wehlage et al., 1989). Moreover, at least some educators specializing in services for the gifted have noted their similarity to those of the alternative schools promoted as a model for the restructuring of all schools. Finally, there is little reason to believe that just because one youngster is as bright as another that the two hold any interests in common. Thus, shared interest in either drama, technology, or democratic living may well drive an effective curriculum for a group of students regardless of their diverse abilities.

Issues of Organization

Curriculum

One popular type of focus is a curricular theme. According to a recent study (Steel & Levine, 1994), 38 percent of the Nation's magnet programs emphasize course content, with math-science-engineering, computer science, humanities, and multicultural studies the most frequent choices, although many secondary school magnets have a career-vocational theme.

A theme must be of sufficient breadth to articulate a full school program: course content and selection, pedagogy, activities, scheduling, and even school organization. The more school components the theme can guide and suffuse, the greater the coherence it will supply. Use of a theme in a magnet school ranges from simply providing elective

UD030198

courses in the theme area to infusing the entire educational program with content related to the theme to give it overall coherence (Blank et al., 1983). Many magnet schools choose the former approach, but studies critical of the fragmentation of the curriculum suggest that such schools may not offer much of an advantage (Sizer, 1984).

Instruction

By contrast, magnet and other schools selecting a pedagogical or instructional focus may have an advantage with regard to cohesion, since a particular instructional approach to teaching can more readily be brought to bear across the curriculum than can a theme based on content.

Some alternative schools, such as City-As-School and Walkabout or Challenge education, have an instructional orientation. This focus is also receiving increasing attention in some of the high school programs associated with the Coalition of Essential Schools. At Central Park East Secondary School in Manhattan, for instance, the theme is the cultivation of five "Habits of Mind," which are five core questions to be posed about all new content introduced (Henderson & Meier, n.d.). The focus of the Urban Academy, another member of the Coalition of Essential Schools, is the inquiry method (Raywid, 1994).

While content themes may have greater salience for students, school traits resulting from instructional foci, such as interesting classes and good treatment of students, are also valuable. One study of career magnet schools attributes the differential effects of such programs to the extent to which they develop, and students pursue, the announced theme (Crain, Heebner, & Si, 1992). John Goodlad, on the other hand, concluded that it is not the curriculum of a school that determines the way students and even staff respond to it; instead, response is determined by the way their lives are daily played out there (1983).

Orientation

This leads to a third type of focus: an orientation or worldview. The "free" schools of the '60s, the "open" schools of the '60s and '70s, and the "traditional" or "fundamental" schools of the '70s and '80s are representative. These focus schools take a particular approach to instruction, but also recommend a fairly distinct set of educational goals and projects a clear character ideal or model, as well as a recognizable outlook on life and its purpose. Each is likely to attract a like-minded constituency. A shared set of assumptions and values, and acceptance of the resulting practices, can bring coherence to the school's program and motivate students to apply themselves to it.

Conclusion

A theme or focus must possess logical coherence. Themes constructed on an additive basis to allow pursuit of pet projects cannot do this. A school with a theme consisting of an arts project, grandparents reading to youngsters, and field trips reflects a malady identified as "projectitis" (Hill & Bonan, 1991). Because the projects are disparate and unconnected, the school's overall program does not cohere. It also cannot attract a group of like-minded school constituents, only an assemblage strongly interested in one or two items on the projects list.

An effective theme or focus should have transformative power—which is not always so much a function of the theme's quality as of the seriousness with which it is taken. This can happen only if the traditional school model is modified considerably. It is not just a matter of reforming one or two components, even such central ones as curriculum and/or pedagogy. Restructuring involves both fundamental and pervasive change in school organization: redefining rules, roles, relationships, and responsibilities, along with such structural components as schedules, administrative units, and governance—and, or course, changes in content and presentation. A school that fulfills the promise of the focus school concept is also a restructured school—or it has failed to deliver.

— Mary Anne Raywid, Hofstra University

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